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ABSTRACT

In addition to her work as novelist and critic, Eudora Welty is also a valuable resource for the teaching of composition, particularly through both her theory and example, for she is always writing about writing. Many of Welty's essays on literary theory speak to problems encountered in the college writing class. Perhaps the most accessible text for demonstrating Welty as a writing teacher is her autobiography "One Writer's Beginnings," in which each section deals with a problem basic to all writing and lends itself to student writing experience. In the first section, entitled "Listening," Welty's dynamic and expressive verbs and adjectives are the basis for an exercise in diction. Classroom assignments emphasizing concrete, concise language and character analysis grow out of this section when used in conjunction with the Welty essay entitled "Clamorous to Learn." Also, Welty's own readings of writers she admires give insights into creative listening, helping students make meaning emerge from texts before responding in their own writing. In the section entitled "Learning To See," Welty's text provides a model of her visual imagination as well as evidence of her belief in the importance of what she calls writing with an "eye for the telling detail." The last section, "Finding a Voice," addresses the techniques of focusing, illustrated in one of her early stories. It includes a discussion of a writer's efforts at achieving distance, perspective, and frame of vision. (An appendix contains student writing assignments for "Finding a Voice.") (KEH)

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EUDORA WELTY AS A RESOURCE
FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

by

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In 1986, the Mississippi Quarterly dedicated a special issue to Eudora Welty for "fifty years of distinguished and greatly esteemed literature." During these fifty years, she has been lauded by an ever-increasing number of devoted readers and has been given some of the literary world's most prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize.

In April 1990, Miss Welty celebrated her 81st birthday. She still travels and, she tells me, she saves as much time as she can for her writing. So although we may still hope for more from her pen, it is time, in the last decade of before the new century, to reassess the Welty canon. Indeed, she herself began the task with her autobiography, One Writer's Beginnings, published in 1984.

Taking my cue from that volume, which is not only the story of her life but also a treatise on writing, I suggest that our reappraisal go beyond her work as a novelist and critic to include her value as a resource for the teaching of composition. For, through both theory and example, she is always writing about writing.

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Even though she consciously chose not to be a teacher by profession, Welty as writing teacher is not an entirely new idea. A review of The Eye of the Story, a collection of essays dating from 1942, refers to the book as the work of a teacher (Cook 37-38). And a recent essay on reader response theory (Pollock 481-505) shows how Welty addresses some of the questions that naturally confront any writer or reader, especially those of style and audience.

Many of Welty's essays on literary theory speak to problems encountered in the college writing class. In "Words into Fiction," for example, her insights about how the combination of experience and vision lead to meaning are relevant to the kind of synthesis we try to teach our students. And her essay on Willa Cather in The Eye of the Story is not only a model of organization and coherence; it is also a treatise on how to read.

Perhaps the most accessible text for demonstrating Welty as writing teacher is One Writer's Beginnings, which we have chosen for use in a junior-level course in writing across the disciplines, designed to prepare students for writing a senior thesis. Welty's autobiography displays her "achievement of order," to borrow a phrase she used to describe Cather's fiction (in Eye of the Story), and which Michael Kreyling has taken for the title of his excellent book Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order. Welty writes One Writer's Beginnings in three sections, each of which deals with a problem basic to all writing:

"Listening," "Learning to See," and "Finding a Voice."

This semester I proposed two versions of the course, both of which use One Writer's Beginnings as the structuring principle, with a selection of readings from an anthology called The Art of Reading (Ed. Eric Gould et al). In the general course, the students respond to poetry, fiction, and non-fiction readings from various disciplines; but in the course with an emphasis on literature, they read short stories and poems from the anthology as well as Welty's most autobiographical novel, The Optimist's Daughter. In both versions of the course, One Writer's Beginnings is used not only as a coherent writing model but also as a text in which Welty can be clearly perceived as a theorist, that is, as a writing teacher.

In the first section of One Writer's Beginnings, entitled "Listening," Welty's dynamic and expressive verbs and adjectives are the basis for an exercise in diction. It is an experience in the pure delight of language and its possibilities. Welty, for example, listens "toward" the hall; she listens "for," not "to," a story (14); and she says that her parents' song "floated" with laughter. Welty's comparison of commotion in the weather with inner feelings aroused by a hovering disturbance (4) suggests an exercise in the use of metaphor. She herself demonstrates the technique in many stories, the earliest in "The Winds," in which an actual storm mirrors the turbulence in the mind of the adolescent protagonist. In The Optimist's Daughter (41, 155,

165) the panic of a wild bird trapped inside a house reflects the emotional claustrophobia of the female protagonist of the novel, who is trapped in confining family and cultural traditions. The students are assigned a paragraph in which they experiment with language and express, by use of an extended metaphor, an anxious moment or a troubling feeling.

Another classroom assignment, emphasizing concrete, concise language and character analysis, grows out of the section sometimes reproduced in anthologies as an essay entitled "Clamorous to Learn," which describes Welty's elementary school teacher. Miss Duling's brass bell seemed to the young Eudora to "grow out of her right arm, as wings grow out of an angel or a tail out of the devil." She was afraid of the teacher, she says, because of "her high-arched bony nose, her eyebrows lifted in half-circles above her hooded, brilliant eyes and...the Kentucky R's in her speech, and the long steps she took in her hightop shoes (23). In addition to modeling the descriptive essay, this section illustrates techniques of coherence such as smooth transitions between subtopics.

The section on Welty's early religious education (30-34) is a fine example of Welty's gift for understated humor in her description of her Sunday School teacher's energetic direction of the children's choir, "making wild chopping motions with both arms together," Welty writes, "[using] a chairleg off one of our Sunday school chairs in her hand to beat time with" (31). And there is

the gently ironic humor of her remembrance of the entire congregation singing some "favorite Methodist hymns [which] all sounded happy and pleased with the world, even though [it seemed to her young ears that] the words ran quite the other way. 'Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline! Someone is sinking today!'" they sang cheerfully, "'I was sinking deep in sin, Far from the peaceful shore, Very deeply stained within, Sinking to rise no more'"(31).

This section has special relevance to a Christian institution such as Oral Roberts University. For one thing, it provides the basis for comparative essays about the students' own religious experiences. In both versions of the class, this assignment uses as a collateral text Langston Hughes' personal narrative entitled "Salvation," which describes the congregation's pressure on the young Langston to "come and be saved." In addition, Welty's recollections of Billy Sunday and other traveling evangelists who preached in Jackson suggests a research project on the history of charismatic evangelists. And another possible research project is an evaluation of Welty's own religious vision as suggested in her fiction; and as implied in her non-fiction by her assertions of the "holiness of life" and by her professed continuing consciousness of the scriptural verse "In the beginning was the Word" (33).

In the "Listening" segment of the course, the emphasis is on the cultivation of that careful "listening" to a writer's work

that a student must do in order to make meaning emerge from the text before responding to it in his or her own writing. Welty's own readings of writers she admires give insights into this kind of creative "listening," the kind that allows her to recognize, for example, that a real wilderness and a real bear underlie the symbolic tangles and animal passions in Faulkner's novels, while the fox in D. H. Lawrence is solely an inhabitant of the inner world of the human spirit that Lawrence has created in his fiction.

Useful for this exercise are readings which the editors of the anthology use to illustrate what they call "active listening" (Gould 18); for example, the first two chapters from Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, a brief passage from Faulkner's Light in August, Seamus Heaney's poem "Death of a Naturalist," Adrienne Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," Barbara Tuchman's "'This is the End of the World': The Black Death," Harlan Ellison's "Repent, Harlequin, said the Ticktockman," and Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" read together with Yeats' poem "Easter 1916."

In the section entitled "Learning to See," Welty's text provides a model of her visual imagination as well as evidence of her belief in the importance of what she calls writing with an "eye for the telling detail" (Conversations 181). The rich distillation that is One Writer's Beginnings is an example of Welty's expert "eye" as well as of the fact that, as she puts it

in The Eye of the Story, the writer must "disentangle the significant" (120) from the broad spectrum of experience. The details in "Learning to See" are most often presented in illustrative anecdotes. An assignment used in the literature section of the course is the an essay about the way such experiences from a writer's real life become fiction. The students are directed to find links between One Writer's Beginnings and Welty's closely-related fictional work The Optimist's Daughter. For example, Welty's poetic description in One Writer's Beginnings of solid ground emerging out of a river under fog in the mountains of West Virginia (51-53) becomes what is essentially a "creation scene" in The Optimist's Daughter (163ff).

Welty's theory of writing often becomes clear in her discussion of other writers. A discussion of the use of spatial images is found in her essay on Willa Cather, where she speaks of how a writer makes a reader "see" an idea. She points to the graphic juxtaposition of two periods of history when "the sword of Coronado and the plow against the sun are fused into one in [Cather's] My Antonia...." "The past can be seen" in this image, Welty explains, "[Cather] lets us see it--in physical form" (Eye of the Story 43). I was pleased with the response of a student who noticed a similar dual vision of time in Welty's description of her mother's fear of water. "How ironic," my student writes, "that out of her own fear of crossing the ferry,

Welty's mother held tightly to Eudora's baby brother, who would one day be surrounded by water in a Pacific minesweeper."

If one needs a justification for the study of the liberal arts in general or for advanced courses in reading and writing in particular, one of Welty's quotations from Cather will do. She quotes from Thea's meditation on Panther Canyon in The Song of the Lark that art is "an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose" (Eye 46). And, of course, teaching students how to "see" what a writer has to "show" is made easier by the use of great masters of the craft like Welty, who has made the effort, both in photography and in fiction, to "imprison" some of life's significant moments.

Other works that I like to use in the section "Learning to See" are those which focus on perception: excerpts from Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi and from Thoreau's Walden, Virginia Woolf's "The Death of the Moth," Loren Eiseley's "The Star Thrower," Joan Didion's "Los Angeles Notebook." and almost anything by Annie Dillard.

Welty writes with a voice distinctly her own and astutely recognizes subtle shadings in others' voices. Her mother's voice, she says, was easily detectable in letters, but her father's was not (76). I know that some writing courses place a "personal" essay at the beginning of the semester in the hope that the

students may get his or her "feelings" out of the way before going on to more analytical assignments. But I believe that developing a "voice" or even learning to recognize another writer's "voice" is a very sophisticated process. Evidently Welty thinks so too, since it is the last section of One Writer's Beginnings that addresses the question. A distinctive voice, however, begins with a distinctive vision. Thus Welty begins the last section of her book, "Finding a Voice," with a discussion of the techniques of focusing, illustrated in one of her early stories called "A Memory." The adolescent protagonist, reflecting Welty's own practice as a young student of painting, and perhaps her need as a young writer to attain perspective and control, makes small, literal frames with her fingers through which to focus, and thus manage the chaos of life, or, as Welty puts it "the unwelcome realism" that must somehow be accommodated to one's own vision (88-89).

This section of the autobiography contains a cogent discussion of a writer's efforts at achieving distance, perspective, and frame of vision (87-88). It also includes Welty's statement that she found her own voice through writing out of her "most deeply feeling self" (101). Throughout the book, however, it is clear that this "deeply feeling self" is also a well-disciplined self, whose training to be a writer has been a long, self-directed apprenticeship in the techniques of "Listening" and "Learning to See."

Although my junior-level writing students may not yet have developed distinctive "voices" of their own, if they and I have done our work well in the course, they should begin to recognize differences in the "voices" of other writers. I have them attempt such a stylistic analysis of One Writer's Beginnings by first noting Welty's own perspective, tone, selection of materials, diction, and by measuring the apparent intimacy or distance they perceive between Welty and her imagined readers. Some of my favorite readings, besides Welty's, to assign for the project of "Finding a Voice" are those in which a consciously created tone is integral to meaning: Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," Zora Neale Hurston's "How it Feels to be Colored Me," Tillie Olson's "I Stand Here Ironing," Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," M. Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain," Marge Piercy's poem "A Work of Artifice," an excerpt from Nancy Friday's My Mother/My Self, and Carl Sagan's "The Quest for Extraterrestrial Intelligence." In this segment of the course, I also assign two short papers to be developed in group discussions in which they try to articulate aspects of the voice and vision in the writing of cultural critics from several disciplines. The first such colloquium paper considers articles on history and the sciences; the second, on education and theology (see Appendix).

Welty's early training in painting and her experience in photography and in the theater may account for her own visual

imagination, a gift which I can neither take for granted in my students nor give them. But what I can offer, through Welty's strategies of "Listening," "Learning to See," and "Finding a Voice," are two theories which are basic to writing: that good writing makes "an idea visible," and that good writing is, as Welty has well said, "an achievement of order."

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APPENDIX

English 301: Reading & Writing in the Disciplines

COLLOQUIA PAPERS (5 points each): 2-3 pp typed

WRITING TECHNIQUE: Synthesis of experience with vision

SEGMENT OF COURSE: "Finding a Voice"

Two short papers will be developed and shared through small group discussions (colloquia). The papers will respond to readings from The Art of Reading, always keeping in mind the ideas Welty puts forth in One Writer's Beginnings.

Colloquium Paper 1: either history or science

Colloquium Paper 2: either education or religion

You may respond in one of two ways: (1) an academic synthesis in which you refer to two or more articles in a discipline or find common ground in articles in different disciplines; (2) a personal narrative in which your synthesis will result from your experience of the reading juxtaposed with your own life experience, perhaps by creating your own version of some pattern or vision you find in the readings. Perhaps write your own myth. Perhaps write as a cultural historian focused on history or science.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Try to identify and understand the voice and vision in each reading. Can you define it? What aspect of the vision is the direct result of the discipline itself? What does a scientist accept for evidence, for example, as compared with a theologian?
2. To demonstrate an experience with the creative use of language, describe a tense or anxious situation by the device of extended metaphor. (See OWB 4)
3. To demonstrate an experience with character, and to emphasize concrete and concise language, compose a character analysis. Use what Welty calls "the telling detail."
4. To demonstrate your experience of a decision made under pressure (moral, ethical, political, practical), evaluate the positive or negative consequences of the pressure. Example: peer pressure, parent pressure, the pressure of the moment in group-experienced emotion. Collateral text: Langston Hughes' "Salvation."

5. To demonstrate an experience of the power of the written word, explicate a passage in which a writer has used visual images to make you "see" an abstract idea. See Welty's description of Willa Cather's juxtaposition of the images of Coronado's sword upon a plow set against a Nebraska horizon, which suggests the two eras in history in My Antonia. (See Welty's Eye of the Story).